



Redefining creative customer service in Atlanta

THERE'S AN OPPORTUNITY IN EVERY CRISIS



In recent years, HighGrove Partners' focus has changed from design/build to landscape management.

When HighGrove Partners was confronted last year with a severe drought in Atlanta, the answer wasn't to ride it out. To the contrary, management team members put their heads together and came up with a comprehensive plan to demonstrate to their clients how they can use less water while still maintaining the health and beauty of their landscapes. Yes, water restrictions last fall cost the company 40 percent of its seasonal installation projects. But a new company initiative helped triple irrigation sales and boost requests for drought-tolerant plant material.

"The drought was really bad last year," recalls company CEO Jim McCutcheon, CLP. "Toward the end of the year, there was an outright watering ban, the exception being new installations that could receive restrictive watering for 30 days."

As he emphasizes though, "In any crisis there is an opportunity." The opportunity came in the form of an innovative program called KnowWater. Launched by HighGrove Partners in February, this environmental stewardship program seeks to maintain landscapes in ways that are not only water-sensitive and environmentally friendly, but also aesthetic and cost effective. The company kicked off the program by conducting an educational symposium with outside speakers. The effort was designed to help clients combat the drought, understand water conservation strategies, and learn about the latest irrigation technologies. Clients then were introduced to nine recommendations (see sidebar, page 12) that would improve their water use, allow them to become better stewards of the environment, and help them realize a solid return on investment in their landscapes and new technology.

“Most of our customers were thrilled with the program, and it has been a win-win for everyone,” explains McCutcheon. “Our customers win, we win, and so does our community.”

Growing the bottom line

HighGrove Partners is celebrating two anniversaries this year. The company is officially seven years old, but its nucleus, as part of Post Properties, will soon be celebrating a 20-year milestone. “Seven years ago, Bill Lincicome, Ken Rogers, and I purchased the landscape management division from Post Properties to launch HighGrove,” McCutcheon explains. “The challenge for us was to learn how to operate a privately held small business, instead of being part of a large operation. We had to learn how to make decisions based on forecasting instead of relying on historical information. We had to get our employees involved and on board, and we had to develop our own competitive advantage.”

They succeeded. Today, HighGrove Partners employs 175 people in two Atlanta locations that together generate around \$12 million a year in sales. Commercial landscape management brings in the bulk of the work, with design/build projects accounting for the rest.

“Over the last several years, we have seen our top line go down and our bottom line go up,” says McCutcheon. “We attribute some of that to a change in service offering from being nearly 80 percent design/build, when we launched the company, to now having a landscape maintenance focus. We also sold off a branch location in Charlotte, which helped us concentrate more in the Atlanta area where we still have tremendous growth opportunities.”

HighGrove Partners has also worked to develop lean management practices to improve its margins. Restructuring operating procedures has allowed the company to deliver more value to its customers, as well — all part of delivering great service, says McCutcheon.

The service solution

As this veteran contractor understands, when providing commercial maintenance services, it's very difficult to differentiate yourself with the quality of work alone. “Having a quality product is a given if you're going to be competitive today,” McCutcheon relates. “It's

how this product is delivered that separates one company from another.” This emphasis on service is implicit in the company's promise to customers, which states: “We promise that your landscape will be the first thing you see and the last thing you worry about.”

What does it take to be a top-notch service provider? Many things, he points out, starting by recognizing that misunderstandings are created by a lack of communication. “We strive to be proactive consultants rather than reactive vendors to our customers. Our efforts are focused on bringing things to their attention before they bring it to ours. We also give customers a communication plan so they know how we will be contacting them and who to contact if they have an issue. Of course, providing good service implies having a quick response time, having knowledgeable people on staff, and being proactive with creative programs such as KnowWater.

“The drivers behind our mission to be the best service provider in the region are customers who are much more savvy and demanding than their predecessors. As landscape contractors, we need to be smarter and provide more value than ever before. We have to be creative and have a point of differentiation on one hand, and on the other continue to be solidly grounded in business fundamentals.”

R & D helps

Being a member of a peer group and having a Customer Advisory Council are part of HighGrove's overall strategy to up the service ante. The company's peer group, called The Next Level Network, is composed of six companies ranging in size from \$10 million to more than \$50 million in annual revenue, each sharing common core values and goals.

“We attend two-day meetings three times a year, and leave with a ton of homework,” McCutcheon explains. “The group is effective because we're very open and hold each other accountable. In fact, the decision to sell our Charlotte branch, which was generating close to \$5 million in revenue, came in part from discussing the issue during a session. Members convinced us that the branch, although profitable, was taking away from our focus in Atlanta. For them, it was a ‘no brainer,’ and it became the same for us.

“I would have joined a peer group 20 years ago if I knew then how valuable the network could be. You don't have to be a



COMPANY PROFILE:

HighGrove Partners, Inc.
Austell, Georgia

Company principals: (left to right)
Bill Lincicome, ASLA, AIA,
Chief Creative Officer & Partner
Kenneth Rogers, President & Partner
Jim McCutcheon, CLP,
Chief Executive Officer & Partner

Founded: 1989

Employees: 175

Annual sales revenue:
\$12 million

Service Offering:
70 percent landscape management
30 percent design/build

PLANET member for 13 years

multimillion dollar company to benefit, either. Companies of any size can form a peer group and participate effectively as long as they share core values and are committed to the process.”

Another significant “meeting of the minds,” HighGrove’s Customer Advisory Council was formed in 2006. The council consists of eight customers who serve as a company sounding board. At quarterly meetings, HighGrove collects feedback on various ideas and initiatives that ultimately help to improve its service offering. “We talk about any concerns they may have with us and major issues that are impacting their operations,” notes McCutcheon. “It’s not just networking with us that’s important. Clients get to share ideas with each other, too. “What truly shocked me originally was how willing they were to participate and help us better meet their needs.”

In addition to receiving input from peers and clients, HighGrove has brought in outside consultants to help fine-tune its service, and it continually relies on its fellow PLANET members for important feedback. “I attended my first PLANET (then ALCA) event in 1995 in Fort Worth when we were still part of Post,” McCutcheon remembers. “My initial response was, ‘holy cow, this group can make a huge impact on our company.’ No way would we be where we are today without PLANET.”

After attending the meeting, McCutcheon says he jumped in feet first, joined committees, and started to network. He was involved with Student Career Days for five years (including three years as the chair) and has been a member of the board of directors. McCutcheon currently serves as the chairman of PLANET’s Crystal Ball Committee.

“I would like to think that our creativity in the marketplace, commitment to service, and understanding of business fundamentals comes naturally,” he adds. “Some of it does, and our management and team members deserve credit here. At the same time, I will reiterate that we would not be where we are today without having those relationships we developed by being a member of PLANET.”

“There’s opportunity in every crisis, including the economic one we’re all currently facing. Getting through relatively unscathed requires being creative, running a financially sound operation, and sharing ideas with individuals who have experienced similar downturns in years past.”



Water restrictions last fall cost this Georgia company 40 percent of its seasonal installation projects.



Jim McCutcheon, CLP, says that how a quality product is delivered separates one company from another.

MANAGING WATER

HighGrove’s KnowWater initiative is a comprehensive water management program. Two major components of the program are a water conservation survey and a follow-up report that includes some of these recommendations:

- Using a different **pressure regulator** that will reduce “fogging” and leaking and increase a system’s longevity.
- Incorporating a **rain sensor** that will eliminate watering during and shortly after precipitation.
- Using **advanced head nozzles** that allow for a more efficient pattern of water and spray angles.
- Replacing **old spray heads** for more efficient watering.
- Using **soil moisture sensors** that measure the soil moisture and adjust the run time of the clock accordingly.
- Adding a feature to an irrigation system that measures actual **rainfall, humidity, and solar radiation** to determine the actual amount of water per zone.
- Using **drip irrigation** around the plant root zone to minimize water loss.
- Using **water harvesting systems**, such as cisterns, to capture rainwater to be used later for watering plants and so forth.
- Continually exploring a variety of **alternative water sources**.

